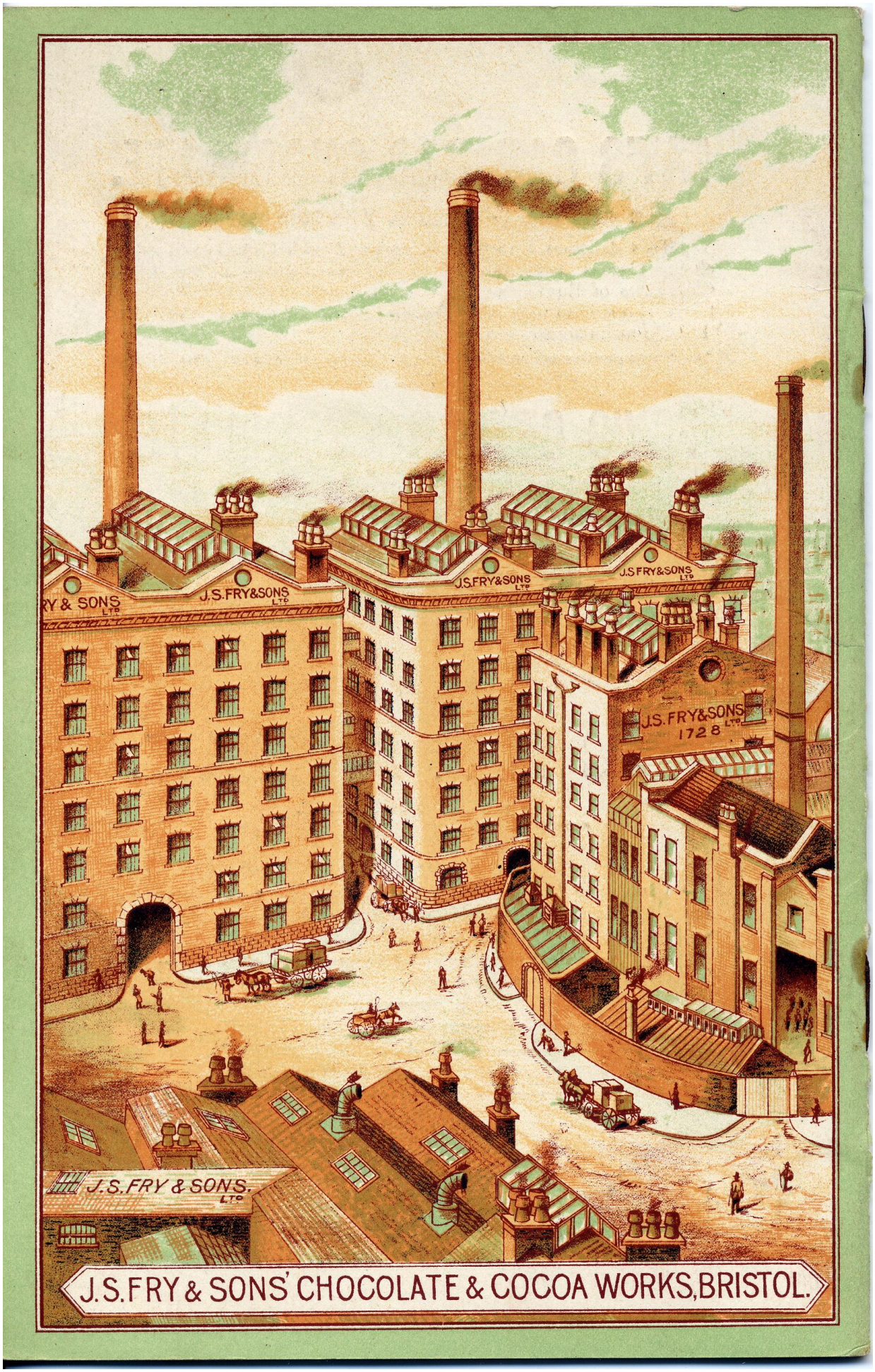
A Virtual Tour of Chocolate Sites in Bristol



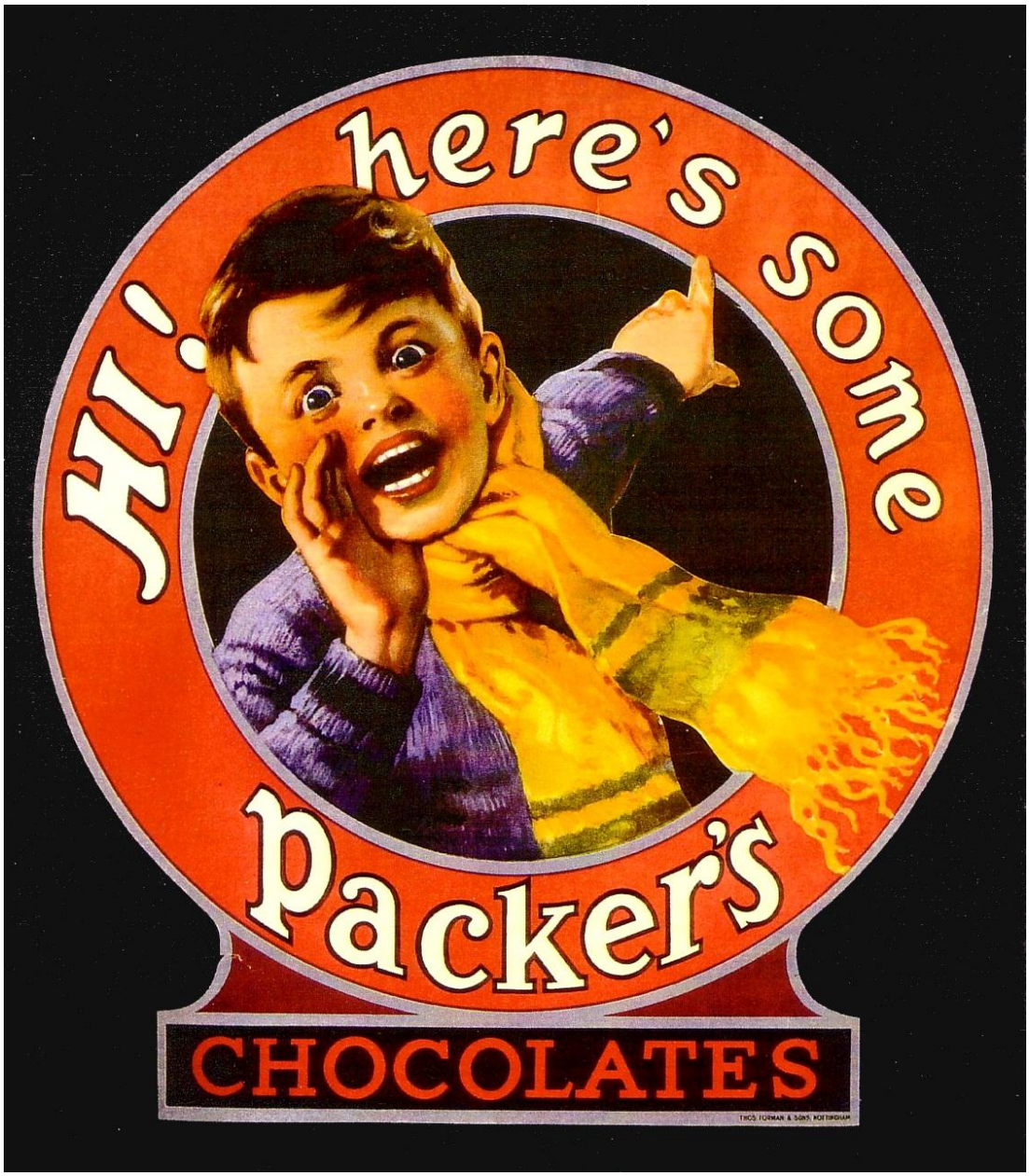
Introduction

For an industry that played such a huge role in Bristol's history, there is little remaining in the built environment to mark chocolate.

The biggest employers, Fry's, were Quakers and reinvested their profits in the well-being of their workforce and other good works that didn't in any way smack of self-aggrandisement – a distinct contrast to the Wills tobacco family whose many bricks and mortar gifts to the city (the University tower, the Museum and Art Gallery and the University's Physics building among them) all carry the family name. What's more, Fry's moved lock, stock and barrel to Somerdale, near Keynsham on the outskirts of the city in the 1920s and its huge concentration of factories in the city centre was progressively demolished between the early 1930s and the mid 1960s.

The next biggest manufacturer, variously known as Packers, Carsons and Elizabeth Shaw, started life in small premises in St Pauls but moved to large purpose-built factories at Greenbank and Shortwood. The latter was demolished in 1998 but the Greenbank factory remains, at the time of writing awaiting a development proposal.

Smaller manufacturers also flourished. In the centre of Bristol, in Lewins Mead, the confectioners Champion Davies & Co, made chocolate in addition to their sugar range. Weber & Co built a factory in Fishponds that still stands. More recently, Guilberts, originally a retailer of French and Belgian chocolates, has been reformed as a small scale hand made manufacturer.

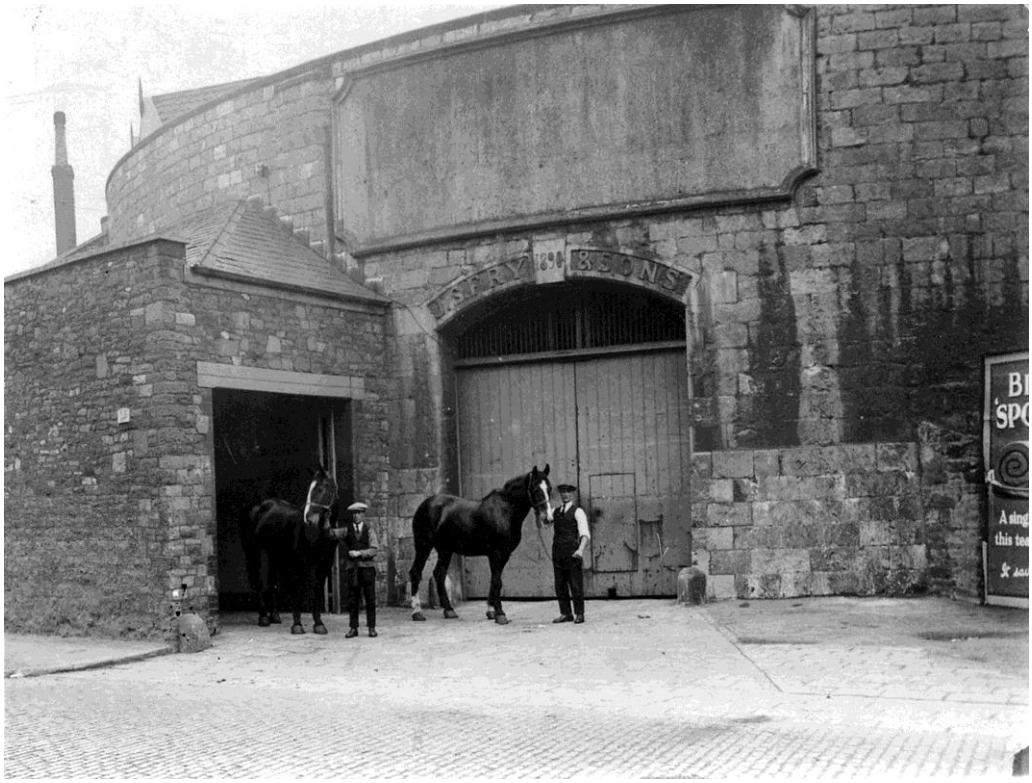


The Walk

Starting from M Shed, go to Wapping Road and turn right.

Fry’s stables and delivery van garage

Just before the mini roundabout, look for the stone arched gateway built into the remains of the New Gaol walls. The inscription ‘J.S. Fry & Sons. 1890’ was once clearly visible over this, which formed the entrance to their garage for delivery vehicles, built after the closure of the Gaol in 1889. At the time of writing, the brick-built structure is still standing but in danger on imminent collapse. Alongside the gateway is the entrance to their stables, built as a lean-to on the outside of the walls. Fry’s moved away from here in the 1930s when the Somerdale factory was commissioned fully.



Retrace your steps along Wapping Road.

Fry’s wooden box factory

Where the entrance to Merchants House now stands was the route of the Bristol Harbour Railway, cutting through here and over a bridge at Bathurst Basin before entering a tunnel under Redcliffe Hill and emerging at Temple Meads. Alongside the railway was Fry’s box factory, where thousands of wooden boxes and crates were made every week. By the 1930s, chocolate was packaged differently and the factory closed. It was demolished in the mid-1970s.

Continue across Prince Street Bridge and turn left around Arnolfini. Cross Pero’s Bridge and turn left, following the water’s edge for 500 metres until you reach Jack’s Brasserie.

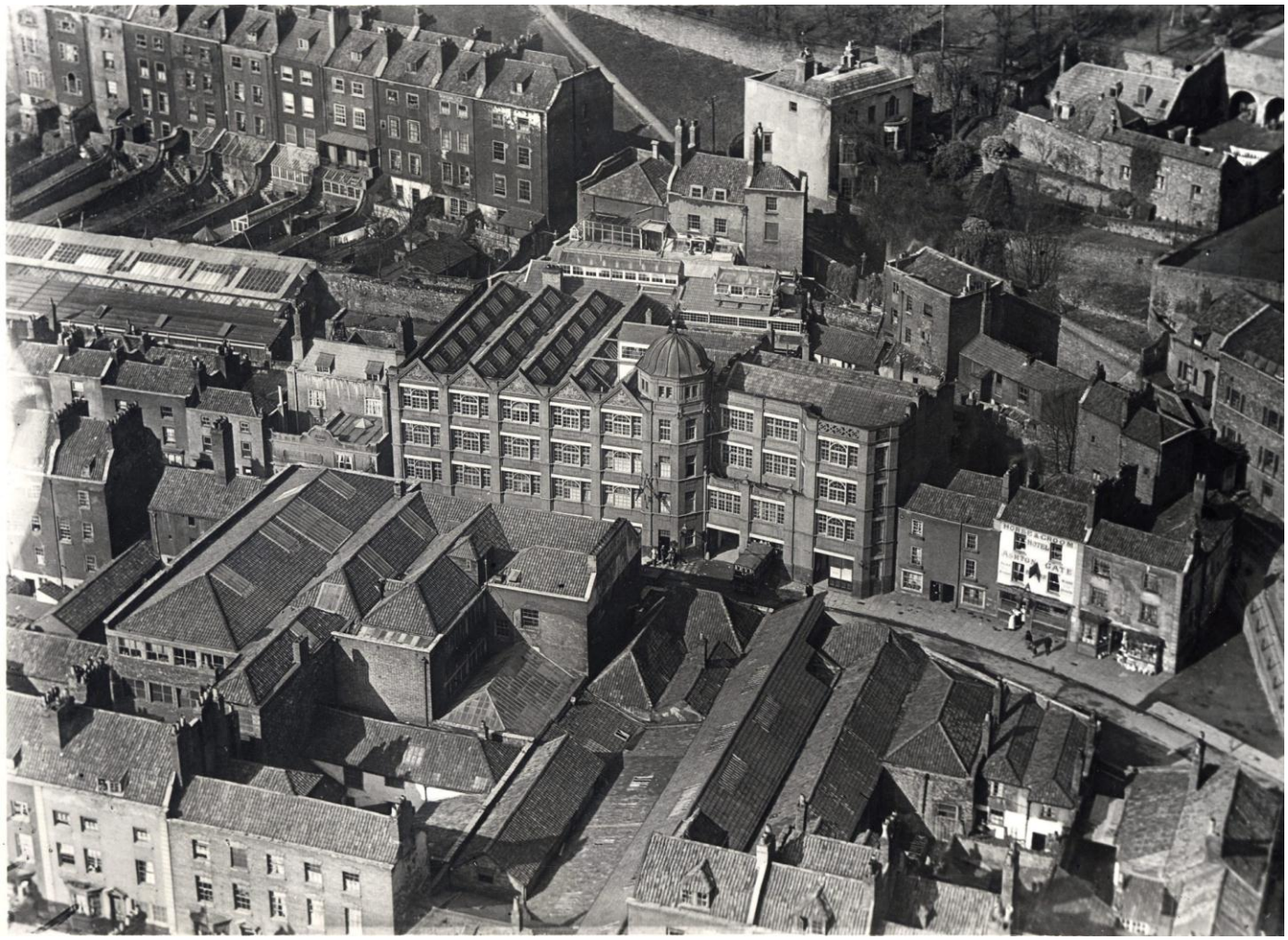
Fry’s sawmills

Behind this is the circular part of Lloyd’s banking headquarters, on the site of which stood Fry’s sawmills. Timber was imported and landed on this quayside, then known as Fry’s Wharf, for conversion into packing cases. This factory was also abandoned in the 1930s and destroyed during the Blitz.

Continue along the dockside until you reach the next café and turn inland along Cathedral Walk. At Anchor Road, cross to College Square and walk up to the Abbey Gateway. Turn left after you pass through and walk past the Central Library. Turn right when you reach St Georges Road, and walk down to the Pineapple pub.

Fry’s Brandon factory

The modern building between it and the Horse & Groom further along the street occupies the site of Fry’s Brandon factory. It was built in 1890 as a purpose-designed carriage works for J. Fuller & Co, but they ceased trading in 1919 and Fry’s took it over as a cocoa canning plant. They moved out in 1930, after which the building became the Central Institute of Education until its demolition in the mid 1970s.



Now make your way to Corn Street. There are several possible routes, the most direct perhaps being Frogmore St, Pipe Lane, across the Centre and up Corn Street. Look out for the tiny entrance to Leonard Lane, on your left, and turn into it.

Guilbert’s chocolate works

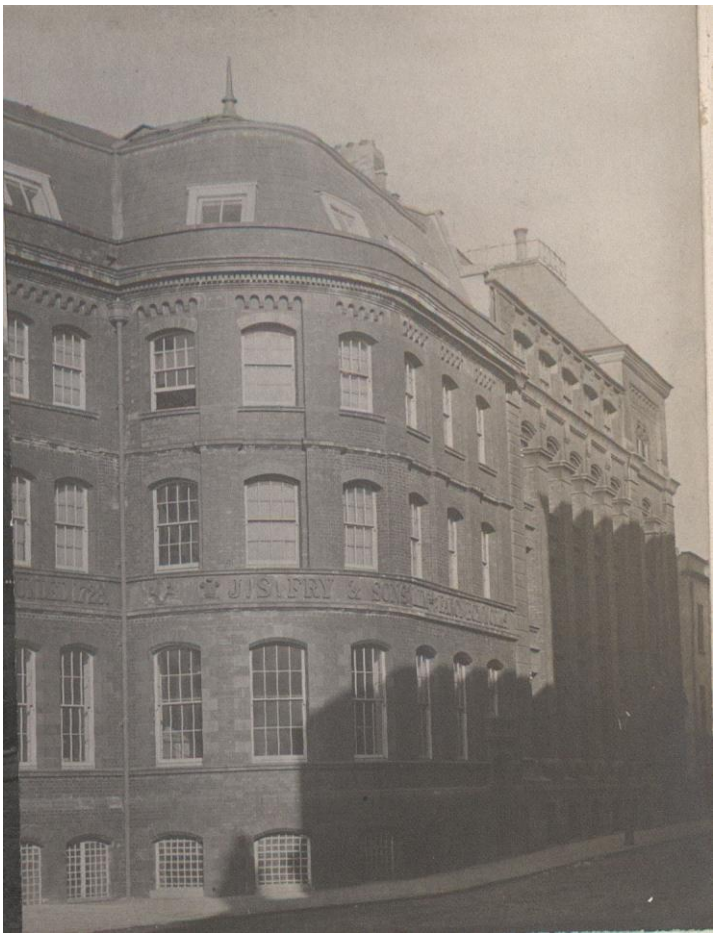
Part way along here is the Craft Centre, for a while the home of Guilberts, before their move to Small Street, which is just opposite where you emerge from the other end of Leonard Lane. Guilbert’s now occupies the historic Foster’s Rooms, next door to Bristol’s Guildhall.

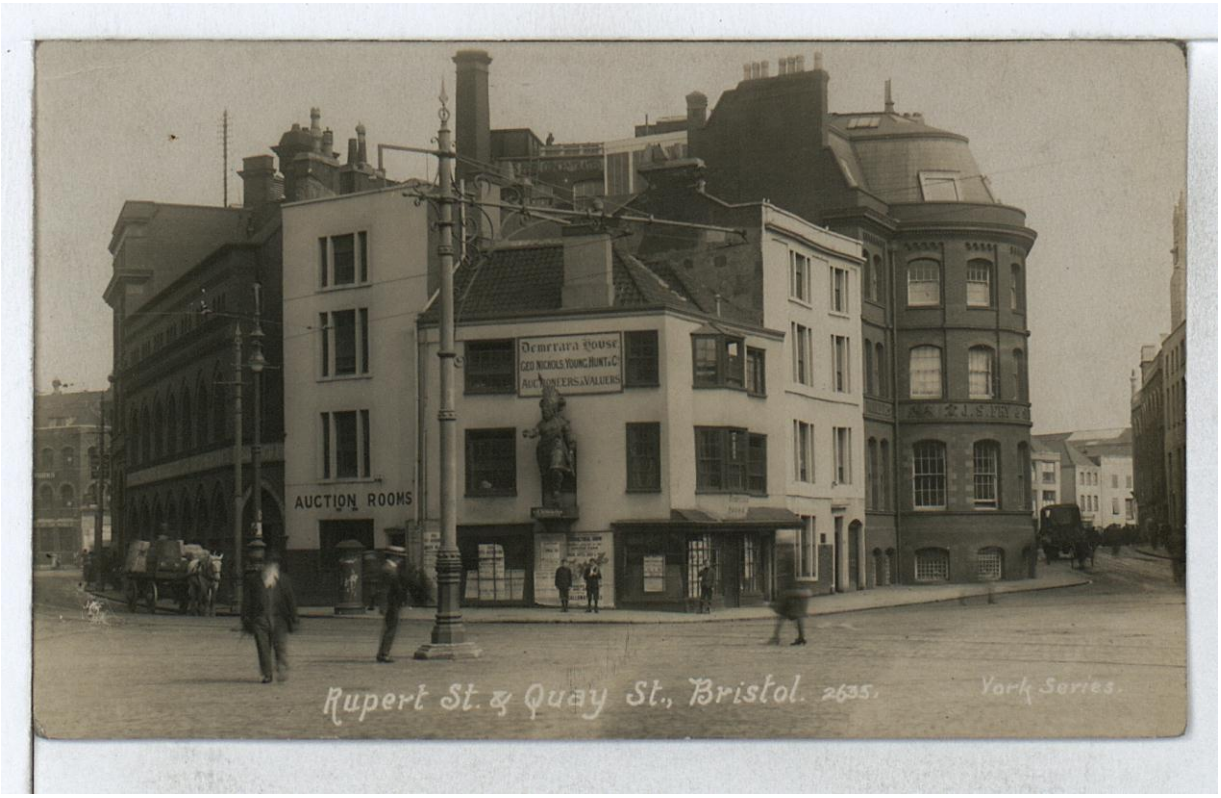
Stop here for some chocolate!

Suitably refreshed, walk down Small Street to the junction with Quay Street.

Fry’s fancy box works

Opposite you is Electricity House, until the late 1930s the site of J.S. Fry & Sons’ fancy box factory, where thousands of highly decorated chocolate boxes were made by hand.

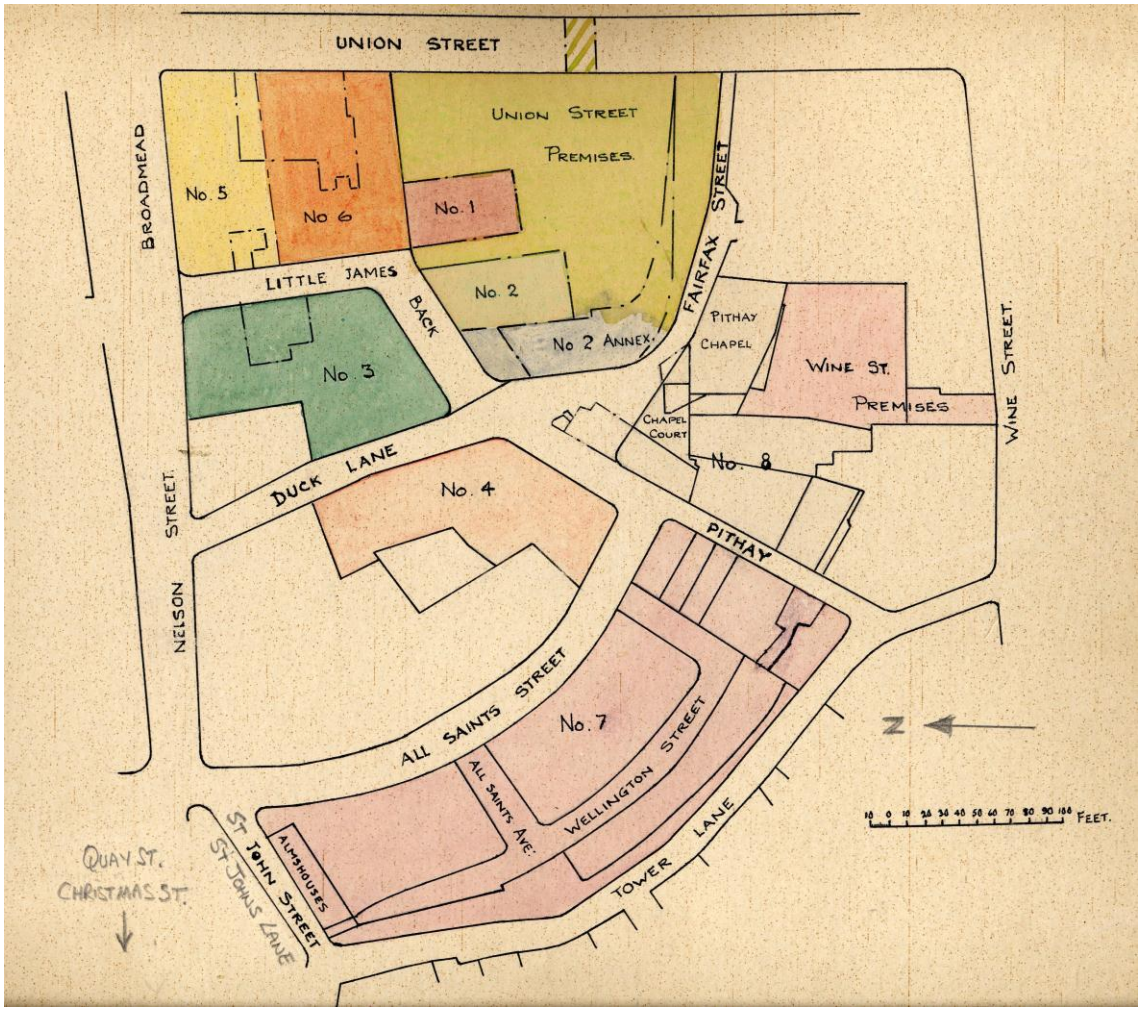




Turn right along Quay Street and take the next right, Broad Street. Walk all the way to the top and turn left onto Wine Street and after about 50 metres turn left into Union Street. Walk down to the bridge over Fairfax Street.

Fry's central factory sites

By 1900, Fry's occupied the whole of the area ahead of you to your left. Bounded by Union Street, Nelson Street, All Saints Lane, and Fairfax Street at the bottom of the Pithay, this area was a mass of factories and warehouses that had erupted during the 1860s and 1870s as Fry's cocoa became hugely popular. All of them were over 5 storeys height and they swept away a tangled enclave of medieval and Tudor domestic buildings to make space.



Alley from back of All Saints' St to back of Wine St.

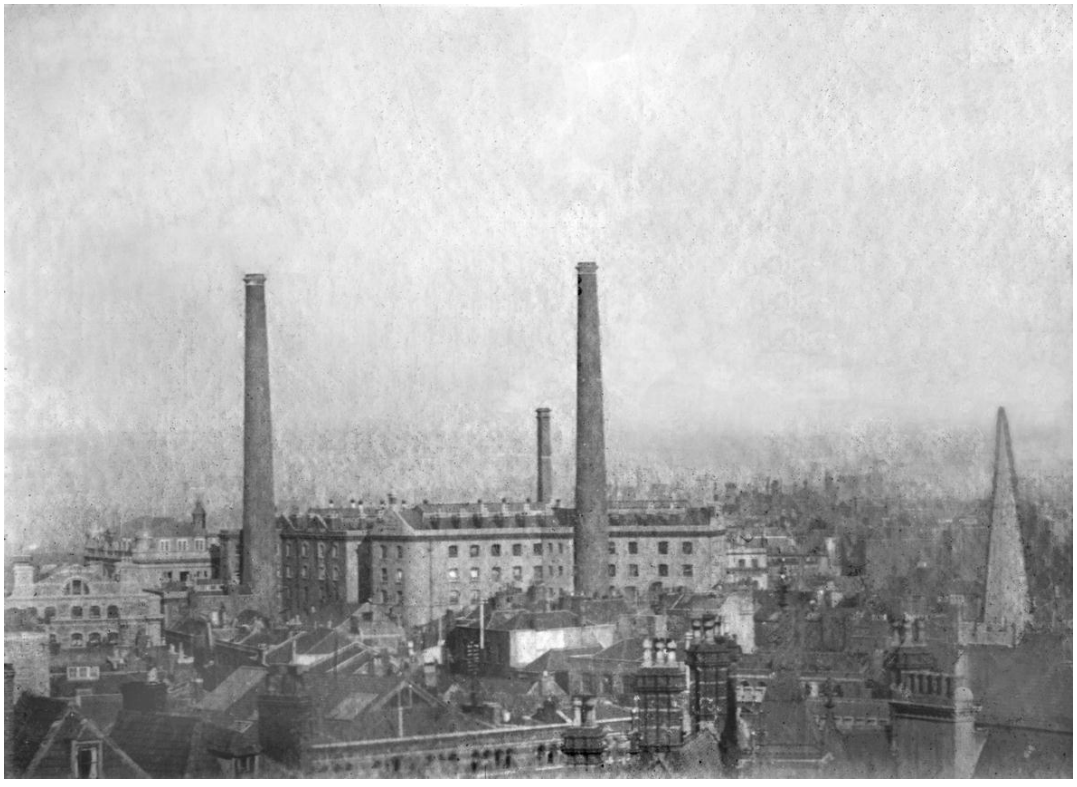
11/84

Street on Site of No. 7 Factory.

11/83

11/82

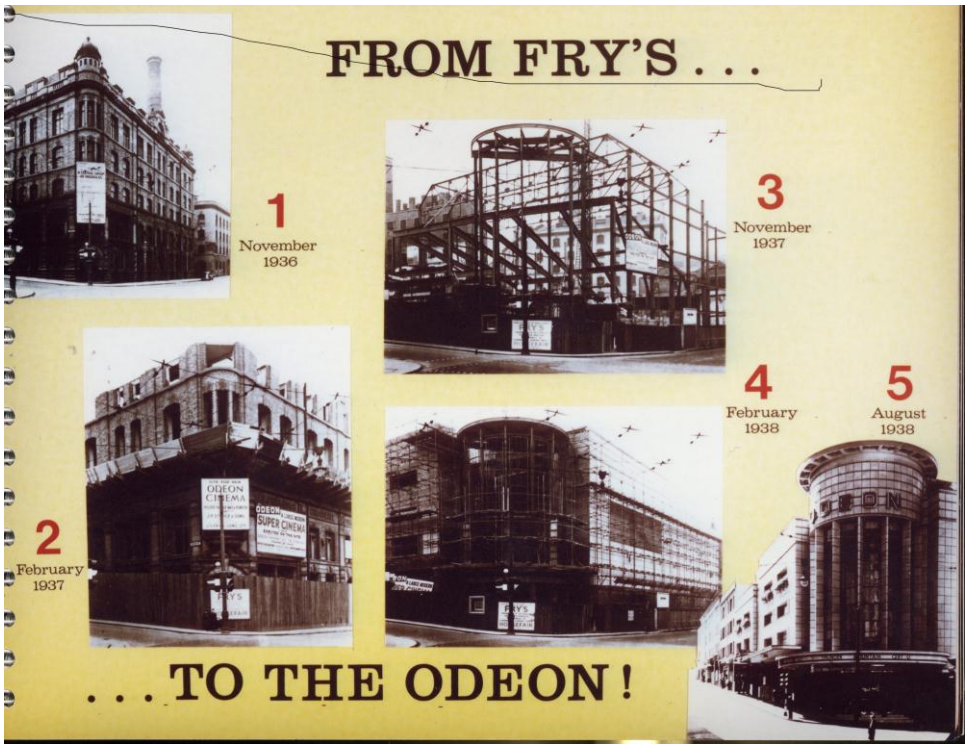
Pithay - Site of Nos 4 & 7 Factories.



Continue down Union Street to the Odeon cinema. Look out for the commemorative plaque on the wall of the Subway sandwich bar.

Fry’s main entrance and offices

At the bottom of Union Street at the junction with Nelson Street was the main entrance to the factory complex. Surmounted by a huge Royal coat of arms, this was among the first of the factories to be demolished. It was replaced in the 1930s by a stylish Odeon cinema, itself remodelled in the 1990s to accommodate a shop.



Walk along Nelson Street to the junction with All Saints Street.

Fry’s All Saints Street factories

All the way up All Saints Street on the right were yet more factory buildings forming part of the Fry’s complex. By 1919, when they merged with Cadbury’s, Fry’s were occupying over 30 separate sites around the city.

Now cross to Bridewell Street. Walk to Rupert Street, cross the road and turn right. At the next junction, Silver Street, turn left.

Champion Davies’ confectionery works

Across the road from you at the junction of Maudlin St and Lewins Mead is a vacant plot, the site of the Champion Davies confectionery works. Established in he 1870s, this factory mostly made boiled sweets but also produced chocolates. It was destroyed during the Blitz.

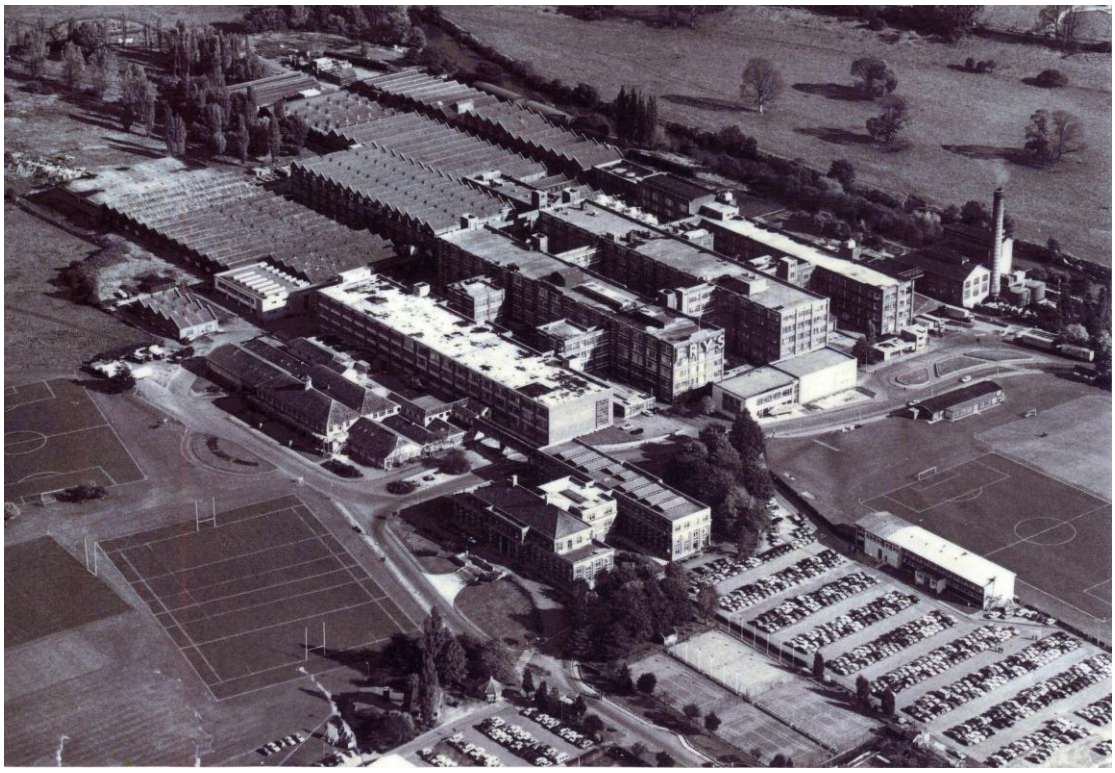
This is the end of the central walk. To return to M Shed, turn left into Lewins Mead and continue through the Centre and along Narrow Quay.

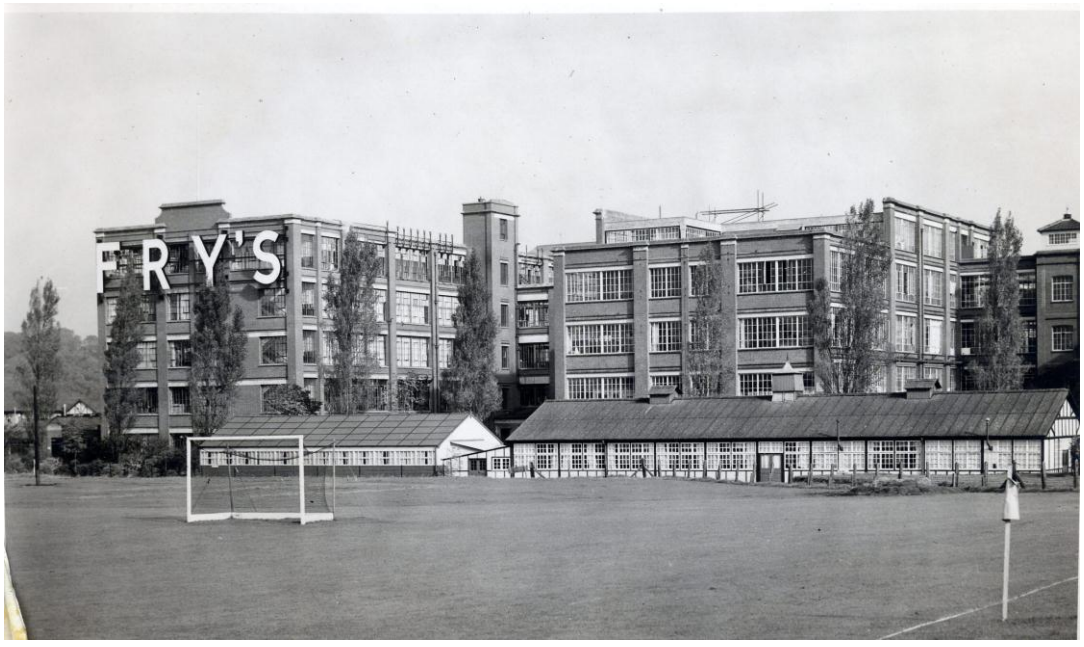
Further afield

You will need to travel further afield to see the remaining buildings and sites of Bristol's chocolate industry.

Fry’s / Cadbury’s Somerdale factory

A train or a bus to Keynsham will bring you close to the factory at Somerdale, started by Fry's in 1925. Despite their Quaker roots, the Fry family never seems to have envisaged a garden community such as those created by the Cadburys at Bournville and the Rowntrees in York. Instead, it was the Cadbury family that promoted the idea after they had merged with Fry's in 1919 as part of their plan to modernise the business by starting a new factory complex to replace the antiquated and cramped buildings in the centre of Bristol. Somerdale was planned with a village alongside it, but somehow this never came to fruition. Instead a modern 20th century factory evolved progressively between 1925 and the last major extension in the 1960s. It was surrounded by green fields, which may soon disappear as the site is developed for housing.





FRY'S

If you have the energy and a bicycle or enjoy walking, follow the Bristol to Bath cycle path for about 3 miles to see the other sites.

Carsons' factory, Shortwood

The furthest out is at Shortwood, close to the fork in the cycle path where Mangotsfield station once stood. The factory was purpose built in 1913 when Packer's bought the Glasgow chocolate company Carsons and transferred it to Bristol. Concrete framed but clad in Cattybrook brick, it was a local landmark until its demolition in 1998. Its connection with chocolate ceased in 1961, however, when it was sold to packaging manufacturers DRG.

Weber’s factory, Fishponds

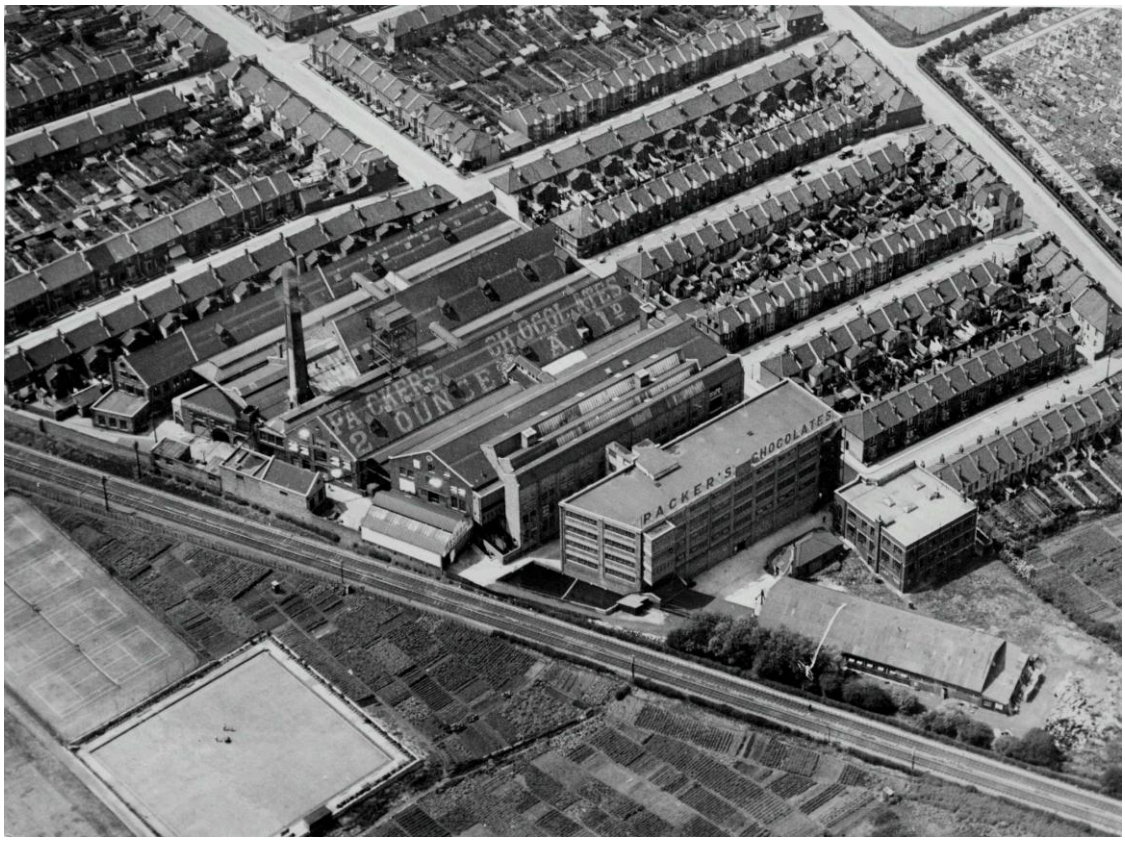
Closer to the city centre, at Fishponds, is the factory built by Weber & Co in 1913. To see it, leave the cycle path at the fish sculpture on the site of Fishponds Station and travel along Filwood Road to Goodneston Road on your right. The factory is on the right near the further end of the road.

Little is known of Weber. He is believed to have been a Swiss chocolatier (some say French) and the company produced the cheaper ranges of chocolates. During the war the factory was taken over by the Thrissell Engineering Co and used for the production of Oerliken guns, but it reverted to confectionery in 1945 and continued in production until the early 1960s.

Return to the cycle path via Lodge Causeway and continue towards Bristol for the final site.

Packer's / Carsons' / Elizabeth Shaw factory, Greenbank

At Greenbank on your right is the former Elizabeth Shaw factory, closed in 2008 and now awaiting a future. It was built in 1908 when the nascent company of Packer & Co had been acquired by businessman Bruce Cole. He swiftly expanded the works and acquired Carsons in 1912, moving them to the newly-built Shortwood factory in 1913. Packers / Carsons thrived until after World War 2, but by the early 1960s were struggling. Businessman James Goldsmith bought the company and helped the factory to thrive for another 20 years, but at the end of the 1980s the company entered a series of ownership and name changes culminating in Elizabeth Shaw that finally saw the factory abandoned in 2006 and production moved abroad. Its future is uncertain at the time of writing.



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